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SUBJECT: MALAISE IN THE PQ

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

11. (SBU) Summary: Parti Quebecois (PQ) veteran Pauline Marois, 57 year old MNA for Taillon and three time party leadership aspirant, announced March 20 she was quitting politics after 25 years of public service. Marois is the second veteran PQ member to resign over the last few days and more resignations are expected -- some voluntary and others at the bidding of PQ leader Andre Boisclair. Boisclair is hoping these departures will allow him to bring fresh and younger faces into the party in time for the next election. But so far Marois' departure has re-ignited a debate on women in politics and called into question Boisclair's approach to rejuvenating the party. While popular support for Charest remains very low, Boisclair does not yet seem to have found a way to present himself and his party as the attractive alternative. End Summary.

12. (SBU) PQ heavyweight and former Minister Pauline Marois called it quits this week, saying "her heart was not in it any longer." Marois was badly defeated by the much younger Andre Boisclair for the party leadership last fall. Over the span of her long political career, Marois held 14 different Quebec ministerial portfolios; including Deputy Premier, Finance, Education, Health, and the Treasury Board. She is widely considered as the most influential and powerful woman politician Quebec has ever had. For many, her exit highlights that a lot still needs to be done on gender equality in politics. The PQ in particular has always had a problem rallying women to the sovereignist cause and they tend to vote more often for the Liberals than male voters.

13. (SBU) Media and public reaction to Marois' resignation is split between disappointment over the loss of a rock-solid and experienced politician and the view that her departure might make room for a young, new generation of Quebec sovereignist politicians. Boisclair himself hinted that other departures would follow but refused to allow suggestions that the party was imploding; he talked instead of a "healthy and normal renewal." (Note: With now two ridings open for Boisclair to run officially, the PQ leader confirmed this week that he himself would compete for a seat in the National Assembly this fall.)

14. (SBU) Others are reading Marois' notice as depriving the more moderate party faction of a strong and influential voice. (That faction represents the majority of PQ members but struggles to make its voice heard.) Some within the PQ worry that her resignation sends a signal that the new PQ leader was unable to rebuild party unity after a fierce and drawn out leadership race.

15. (SBU) Comment: There are clearly some changes going on within the PQ. Some are generational while others are a result of the declining interest in sovereignty. Marois' resignation is likely to weaken the PQ, at least in the near term. Boisclair may be calculating that he can afford to take some risks given PLQ leader Charest's continuing unpopularity. But at some point he will have to go beyond banking on voter dissatisfaction with Charest, and earn the confidence of the public based upon his actions. For now, Boisclair has yet to personally win over the Quebec public.

FRIEDMAN